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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - January 17, 2006

1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by
Embassy Minsk.

Human Rights

12. Polish Activists Fined

The Grodno Border Control Unit on January 5 fined two Union of
Belarusian Poles (UBP) activists Andrei Pochobut and Andrei
Pisalnik the maximum USD 135 for allegedly entering a restricted
border zone. Border guards stopped the activists on December 26 on
their way to Sapotkin where they intended to meet local UBP
members. According to Pochobut, the border guard unit told the
activists that authorities would not give them permission to be in
the zone.

13. Union Members Forced to Leave

On January 6, the leadership of the independent trade union at the
AZOT factory in Grodno filed a complaint to the regional
prosecutor's office, stating that the company administration forced
workers to leave their union. According to Radio Liberty reports,
on January 5, 40 workers turned in handwritten applications to
terminate their membership. The prosecutor is supposed to check
the allegations and prosecute those responsible at AZOT under a law
against coercion. AZOT is the biggest company in Grodno and its
independent trade union is one of the largest with 800 members.

14. Police Confiscate Private Newspaper

Three plainclothesmen in Svetlogorsk on January 6 stopped the
editor-in-chief of the private newspaper Rehiyanal'ny Naviny (Local
News), Telman Maslyukov. Maslyukov reported that the men searched
his backpack, which contained 297 copies of his paper and 1,289 New
Year greeting cards signed by 10+ candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich,
and then brought him to the police station. Police officers
confiscated all Maslyukov's written materials and promised to
return the copies once they were cleared.

15. Independent Paper Seized Again

Border guards seized the entire print run of the second issue of
independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya (NV) on January 9. Editor-in-
Chief Joseph Seredich told reporters that the 27,000 copies, which
were printed in Smolensk and accompanied by proper documentation,
were seized and taken to the district police station in Dubrovno,
Vitebsk region. On January 12, Seredich received the seized cargo
after having a seven-hour conversation with police and convincing
them that the seizure was illegal. On January 3, NV's entire print
run of the first issue was seized, but released the following day
after the printing house in Smolensk delivered a missing document.

16. Murdered Journalist's Son Remains in Jail

Minsk's Pervomaisky district judge on January 10 denied a request to release the son of murdered journalist Veronika Cherkasova before his trial. Anton Filimonov, 16, was arrested on December 27 for counterfeiting. He reportedly admitted to making several 5,000 and 10,000-rubel bills with friends to see who had the better computer. Out of all the boys involved in the scheme, Filimonov was the only one who remained in custody. According to his grandparents, unidentified persons repeatedly visit Filimonov and try to persuade him to confess to killing his mother in October 2004. Investigators dropped Filimonov as a suspect because of lack of evidence and the Minsk City Prosecutor's office suspended the probe for lack of suspects.

17. Amendments Are Legal?

On January 11, the Constitution Court refused to examine the legality of the amendments to the Criminal Code that provide jail sentences for activities deemed revolutionary. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) filed the appeal fearing that the amendments could be used against the independent media. The Court's reply, dated December 29, claimed that the Court could not examine the legality of the amendments since they had not yet been signed into law or were in force. The amendments came into force on January 1. BAJ lawyer Andrei Bastunets accused the Court of avoiding a decision by hiding behind a technicality and assured that the BAJ would file another appeal.

18. Activist Detained

Human rights activist Alex Abramovich was detained on January 11 in front of the Presidential Administration building as he held a placard that read "Elections Without Dictator Lukashenko." Other human rights activists and reporters were to gather in front of NV headquarters and march to the Presidential Administration to protest the authorities' second seizure of NV. Protests in

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observance did not witness any such gathering. On January 12, Abramovich was sentenced to seven days in jail.

19. Lebedko Travel Ban

On January 11, independent online news source Belapan reported that the Visa and Passport Department denied Anatoly Lebedko, leader of the United Civic Party (UCP), a foreign travel stamp under the pretext that the BKG had not granted permission. After publicly airing his protest, Lebedko received his foreign travel stamp on January 17, but it was valid for only two years and not three as requested. Lebedko did not know the official reasoning behind the incident, but believes it was due to his political activities. Although the UCP office reported that the ban prevented Lebedko from traveling abroad, the UCP leader traveled to Vilnius on January 14 using an old passport. According to one version of the story, Lebedko's alleged travel ban was due to the fact that his passport had no space for visas, let alone a travel stamp.

10. Pensioners Denied Association

On January 11 the Minsk city government rejected a second application submitted by pensioners seeking permission to hold a founding convention for their association. The pensioners, who support democratic change, petitioned the government to designate a hall for the gathering, but authorities replied that the pensioners did not indicate their previous employment on the application nor who would pay for security, ambulance, and cleaning services. The group plans to seek a venue in a neighboring country.

11. Student Not Welcomed Back to School

The Ministry of Education (MoE) dismissed an appeal to reinstate student Tatiana Khoma in the State Economic University (SEC). Khoma, a fourth-year student, was expelled in November after attending a National Unions of Students of Europe conference in France and being elected to its executive committee. The MoE sent a letter to Khoma listing the 14 80-minute classes she missed in the first semester of the 2004-2005 academic year, 23 classes in

the second semester, and 11 classes in the first semester of the 2005-2006 academic year. Khoma plans to take the case to court.

Civil Society

¶12. Polish Radio in Belarus

On January 6, Polish PM Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz informed 10+ candidate Milinkevich that Poland would begin broadcasting radio programs to Belarus ahead of the March elections. Milinkevich considered the move "very important" in supplying Belarusians with independent information. The broadcasts would include programs in Belarusian and Polish languages.

¶13. Nazi March Uninterrupted

On January 9, independent internet news source BelaPan reported that several dozen skinheads marched through Grodno shouting obscenities and nazi slogans and attacking pedestrians. One victim, Nikita Pavroz, told reporters that 30 skinheads marched through the city's central square and beat him up after he tried to restrain them. The march dispersed when police arrived. According to Pavroz, it was the first skinhead march Grodno had seen in five years. UBP activist and journalist Pochobut noted the rise in activity among skinheads and neo nazis in Grodno, most notably the appearance of Nazi graffiti on city streets. The police department at the October district, where the march took place, claimed they were not aware of any such march.

¶14. No Private Doctors in Public Hospitals

On January 11, the Ministry of Health (MoH) banned state-employed doctors from holding a second job at private medical institutions. According to a MoH department head, the crucial decision has no alternative - one either chooses to work for the state or for the private sector. The official noted that, "if a doctor does not like his/her job conditions at a private institution, he/she is welcome to work with a state one." In 2005, 700 district doctors left state medical institutions to work in the private sector. The official added that private health clinics had a good future ahead of them and due to people's rising income, the ministry's ban would not affect them.

¶15. Russian TV Re-opens Bureau In Minsk

The Belarusian Embassy in Moscow announced on January 12 that the Belarusian Council of Ministers would allow the Russian State Television and Radio Company (RSTRC) to reopen its office in Minsk. The GOB closed the office in July 2004 after it allegedly misreported the number of participants in an opposition protest.

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Authorities accused the RSTRC of disseminating false information that insulted Belarusian citizens and had a negative effect on Belarus' image. RSTRC expects to get its Belarusian accreditation within two weeks.

¶16. MPs Want Internet Control

In a January 11 session of Parliament's human rights and national relations committee, MPs decided it was necessary to create a "legal" framework for several internet sources. According to the MPs, internet media sources and their functions should be specified by law. State-controlled newspaper Narodnaya Gazeta and wire service BelTA participated in the meeting. The MPs concluded that the legal regulations for Belarus' media was outdated and contained many "gaps." The Information Ministry was continuing its work on a new mass media law, though its preparation had been prolonged.

Economy

¶17. GOB Nationalizes Motorcycle Plant

On January 9, President Lukashenko signed an ordinance to support Belarus' "privately-owned" motorcycle and bicycle factory Motovelo in exchange for 99.9 percent of its shares. Lukashenko plans to restructure the company's USD 978,000 debt by increasing the fund of the company by the total sum of the debts. The state would repay Motovelo's USD 4.9 million in utilities in return for a transfer of shares to the state. Belpromstroybank will loan Motovelo USD 1.4 million to purchase materials and components and the Minsk city administration would provide Motovelo USD 4 million in subsidies for 2006 and an additional USD 4 million in 2007. Motovelo will transfer shares to each entity in return for the loans. In November, 150 workers went on strike after not receiving monthly wages. In 2005, Motovelo posted USD 4.1 million in losses.

18. .And Yet Another Plant

Lukashenko on January 10 signed another ordinance granting the GOB a greater stake in the joint stock Gorodeya Sugar Refinery. The company plans to issue additional shares, equal to the sum of their USD 8 million debt in equipment purchases, giving the GOB a 99.9 percent stake. Gorodeya Sugar Refinery was established in 1956 and turned into a joint-stock company in 1995. In 2004, the refinery broke even with USD 80 million in revenues and USD 76 million in expenses. In 2003-2004, budget funds and preferential loans to the refinery reached USD 18 million. In 2005-2006, the refinery would have to export no less than 90,000 tons of white sugar (processed from last year's sugar beet harvest) to break even.

19. Belarus Wants In WTO

After a January 13 meeting with Amina Mohamed, chair of the WTO General Council representative of Kenya in the UN, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Martynov announced that the next round of talks on Belarus' accession to the WTO would be in February. Martynov opined it was too early to speculate the possible date of Belarus' accession to the WTO, though Belarus would "do everything possible" to speed up the process. The minister noted that customs regulations and the "golden share" were issues that needed to be settled and hoped no others would emerge. According to Martynov, Belarus planned to finish bilateral negotiations with WTO members and hoped to sign agreements with 15 to 20 countries. Currently, Belarus has bilateral agreements with only five countries, including China and Turkey. Mohammed noted that Belarus was at an "advanced" stage of WTO accession and claimed that the long negotiations were necessary to ensure that Belarus fully complied with WTO standards.

Military

20. Algerian Military Shipment

The Middle East Newsline agency reported on January 10 that Belarus and Algeria were discussing a USD 1.5 billion arms deal. According to the article, Algeria plans to buy MiG-29 aircraft from Belarus at a lower price than what Russia offered. Belarus Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev made a visit to Algeria to discuss bilateral military cooperation. The Algerian defense ministry told reporters that Belarus offered "everything," from training in weapons development to production. Belarusian officials were not available for comment.

Anti-U.S. Propaganda

21. U.S. Created The Bird Flu

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On January 9, Belarusian National Television (BT) aired a program entitled Human Rights: Look At The World, hosted by Yevgeny Novikov. Novikov accused the U.S. of intentionally starting the SARS, bird flu, and mad cow pandemics in order to damage Europe and

Asia's economies and conquer new market outlets. Novikov concluded this because the U.S. has not yet had an outbreak. Such "artificial" outbreaks in Asian and European countries, as Novikov opined, served as pretexts for U.S.-led military invasions in some of the afflicted nations in order to "defend the local population from disease and installing U.S. world order."

The Absurd

122. Oxford's University Status in Question

The British Deputy Chief of Mission in Minsk told Econoff that a Belarusian student had gained admission and a full scholarship to study at Oxford. In 2005, the President issued a new law requiring all students wanting to study abroad to first get permission from the Ministry of Education (MoE). Before allowing the student to leave for Oxford, the MoE doubted Oxford's existence and demanded to see the university's original charter, not a copy. The British DCM, caught by surprise, told the MoE that sending the charter of the 900-year university to Belarus was out of the question.

123. Cambridge Names MP "International Professional of 2005"

MP and outspoken critic of the West Nikolai Cherginets told independent online news source BelaPan that on December 29, the International Biographical Center at Cambridge named him the "International Professional of the Year 2005." The MP claimed to have received a certificate and a medal for his achievements in politics and called it "recognition of Belarus' progress." According to the British DCM, the International Biographical Center was really a publishing house where anyone can nominate a person for an award. In addition, Cherginets had not been to the UK to collect his "award." On January 10, the British Embassy issued a statement denying that Cambridge had awarded Cherginets the prize. "When informed of the reports, Cambridge University announced that at the University level, there was no program of honoring politicians in this way."

Quote of the Week

124. After his amateur hockey team won a tournament for the second year in a row on January 9, Lukashenko warned all Belarus' Olympic athletes about the upcoming Turin games.

"[Belarusian athletes] should feel shamed if they don't cheer our people with excellent results. We've done everything possible for them. That is why we are expecting good results."

125. During a trip to Vitebsk, Lukashenko stated that he would not allow any destabilization of Belarus and commented that the March elections would not be falsified:

"We don't need to rig the vote. On the contrary, we are doing our utmost to avoid any accusations, even accidental. We have registered all [contenders] and are nearly collecting signatures for them, but they are still complaining. Is the government getting in anybody's way? It is not."

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